

SOUTH JERSEY COURIER-POST

Sunday, October 21, 2001

ROTC competition turns serious

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Crawling under barbed wire, blasting enemy bunkers with hand grenades and shooting off rounds of M-16 rifles passes for normal at the annual ROTC Ranger Challenge. In previous years, the three-day event of Army-bound college students often served as a fun diversion from academia. This year, one word hung over the competition: "Afghanistan." "I don't know what decisions our president is going to make in the future," said Capt. Wade Johnson as he watched a group of students from Lehigh University prepare to ford a stream with a rope. "I will say that the tone is much more serious today. The cadets are much more focused on the task at hand." News Saturday morning that more than 100 Army Rangers and other special forces had swept through a Taliban stronghold in southern Afghanistan only reinforced the belief that senior ROTC cadets, especially those graduating in December, may be perilously close to real combat. The annual regional competition rotates among Army bases. The best team gets a trophy and the worst a rock. This weekend it is being held at Fort Dix. Security is especially tight since the terrorist attacks and a reservist went berserk Oct. 12, shooting two soldiers and two local policemen before being killed by police. Jen Nihill, a University of Scranton senior, was one of those setting out on the rope bridge challenge Saturday morning. The Mount Laurel native and Lenape High School graduate watched as the first member of her nine-person team crossed the stream and lashed a rope to a pole. Nihill, a biology major, jumped to grab the rope with the help of other cadets and was soon upside down, shimmying across with an M-16 strapped to her back. "Go Jen, go. Don't give up!" teammates shouted. "I think more people are more excited now," Nihill said, dripping wet on the opposite bank after completing the event. Nihill, a captain in the ROTC, said most of the 200 cadets from 22 colleges in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania at the event were in advanced ROTC. They already have accepted that they could be called to fight if military

action is prolonged. "Now we can apply what we've learned," the 21-year-old added. Army ROTC is a college elective broken into a basic and advanced course that allows students to earn college credits and scholarships. ROTC stands for Reserve Officers' Training Corps. Advanced students serve eight years in the Army after graduating as commissioned officers. They must serve two to four of those years in active duty. They can serve the following years in the reserves. Nihill plans to apply for a position with military intelligence and serve eight years of active duty. The competition, which continues today, involves five events. They include crossing the rope bridge, dismantling and reassembling an M-16 and negotiating a hand-grenade assault course. "It does seem more serious this time," said Brad Henry, a senior at The College of New Jersey, who wants to be an infantry officer. "I don't want to go on a patriotic kick or anything," Henry said, "but that's what it's all about. Over the next few years, yeah, somebody could be shooting at you. So that takes the fun and games out of it. It is more serious now." Henry was later called to a briefing on the grenade course. There he was to run, jump and crawl with "inert" grenades hooked to his belt. The grenades have practice fuses that pop like fireworks when lobbed into bunkers where dummies awaited.